WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY TO DO?

Because of the timing of the Coronavirus pandemic, the educational sector took a significant hit. Grammar schools, high schools, and universities all struggled with decisions on whether to cancel classes, teach on-line, hold or cancel graduation, etc. However, just as the spring 2020 semester comes to an end, academia now faces the realization that this crisis may have changed our approach to education forever. Universities are seeing an impact on brand and finances.

In this Tripwire Report, I want to address the necessary next steps for universities. The next and most significant two steps for universities planning for the fall semester are first, conducting an After Action Report (AAR), and second, conducting an up-to-date Risk Analysis. An AAR is arguably the most critical part of a Preparedness plan. Learning from previous crises and adjusting your Preparedness based on lessons learned and mistakes made (and there are always mistakes made), is important. Assessing the errors made and making changes for your future policies and procedures will help you better assess your future Risk. Based on the previous crisis, an updated Risk Analysis must be conducted.

Here are the issues that I believe universities will have to overcome. First, does the university have a trained and experienced Crisis Manager? If so, he/she should conduct both a critical AAR and conduct an honest Risk Analysis? Also, does that Crisis Management Team have the support and confidence of the university administration? This is a crucial piece to a successful Crisis Response capability.

A Risk Analysis is formulated on a detailed assessment of Threats, Vulnerabilities, and Impact.

If we assume the looming Threat for the fall semester is a re-ignition of the Corona Virus, let's discuss the Vulnerabilities. Being a contagious virus with no vaccine, proximity, and frequency of group gatherings becomes a vulnerability. Daily routines such as classroom instruction, sporting events, and social events, just to name a few standard college activities, become a vulnerability. Certainly, the Impact would be felt if once again, all students were mandated to leave campus and return to on-line learning. Faculty were banned from their offices and only met with students on-line, etc. Based on these criteria alone, one would certainly assess the Risk as high for universities. However, an appropriate and detailed Risk Analysis would include research into criteria such as the science supporting the potential of the virus returning, precautions put in place, the environment of the university, addressing the threat differently based on the AAR. All these criteria will impact the Risk level and better prepare and mitigate the threat.

A complete and detailed Risk Analysis will also address three critical parts of the analysis, that is Risk Acceptance, Risk Mitigation, and Risk Avoidance. There should always be a discussion about whether a procedure can be put in place to allow a school to mitigate the assessed risk or even accept the risk because it is assessed as a low-risk situation. Risk Avoidance is always an option but generally is the most extreme approach and leads to other negative impacts, i.e. lost revenue, damaged brand, downsizing, etc.

We know that universities rely on tuition dollars to fund programs and pay faculty salaries. Much like businesses, revenue is the key to success. If students and faculty feel safe, a school will thrive. However, even if the appearance of a High-Risk environment exists, a university may suffer. Each university is different and Risk should be university-specific and not a blanket approach based on a Government recommendation or what other universities are doing. A deep and quality AAR and Risk Analysis will benefit a university financially and potentially their brand.

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